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Conflict in Kampuchea: Prospects for the Resistance and Selected Implications for the United States

Special National Intelligence Estimate

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The Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the intelligence organization of the Department of State.

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The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army

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PREFACE

This Estimate assesses probable developments in resistance activities in Kampuchea over the next several years. It first examines the assets and liabilities of the Vietnamese in Kampuchea and each of the three principal Khmer resistance organizations—the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) organization, Son Sann's Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF), and Prince Sihanouk's Moulinaka. The Estimate summarizes progress in establishing a coalition or united front among the resistance groups and addresses the inherent strains of such a coalition. It also notes the crucial influence on the resistance of foreign interests in Kampuchea and concludes with a review of the resistance's prospects and the implications. Because of continuing political maneuvering by all resistance factions, the Estimate does not attempt to address the entire range of possible permutations of a coalition or united front.

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KEY JUDGMENTS

The prospect for an effective coalition of the divided and antagonistic Khmer resistance groups is not good, and they will continue to operate as separate entities—even if some form of association is eventually established:

- The formation of even a loose coalition would help shore up support for retention of the DK's seat at the UN.
- The DK will remain the strongest and largest resistance group.
- Even with an increase of outside support, it remains to be seen whether the KPNLF would be able to expand its military operations sufficiently in order to be part of an eventual political solution in Kampuchea.

The Khmer resistance is not likely to dislodge the Vietnamese from Kampuchea, but, with continued access to external support, the resistance could indefinitely keep the Vietnamese from “pacifying” Kampuchea:

- Hanoi is unlikely to make any concessions it views as significantly endangering its dominance in Kampuchea.¹

A Vietnamese perception that a much larger and more capable resistance force was being created, in a coalition or in a buildup of the KPNLF, would increase the probability of a decision to attack all resistance concentrations along the border:

- In the event of such a far-reaching decision, the presence of Thai military units near the border might not be a constraint.

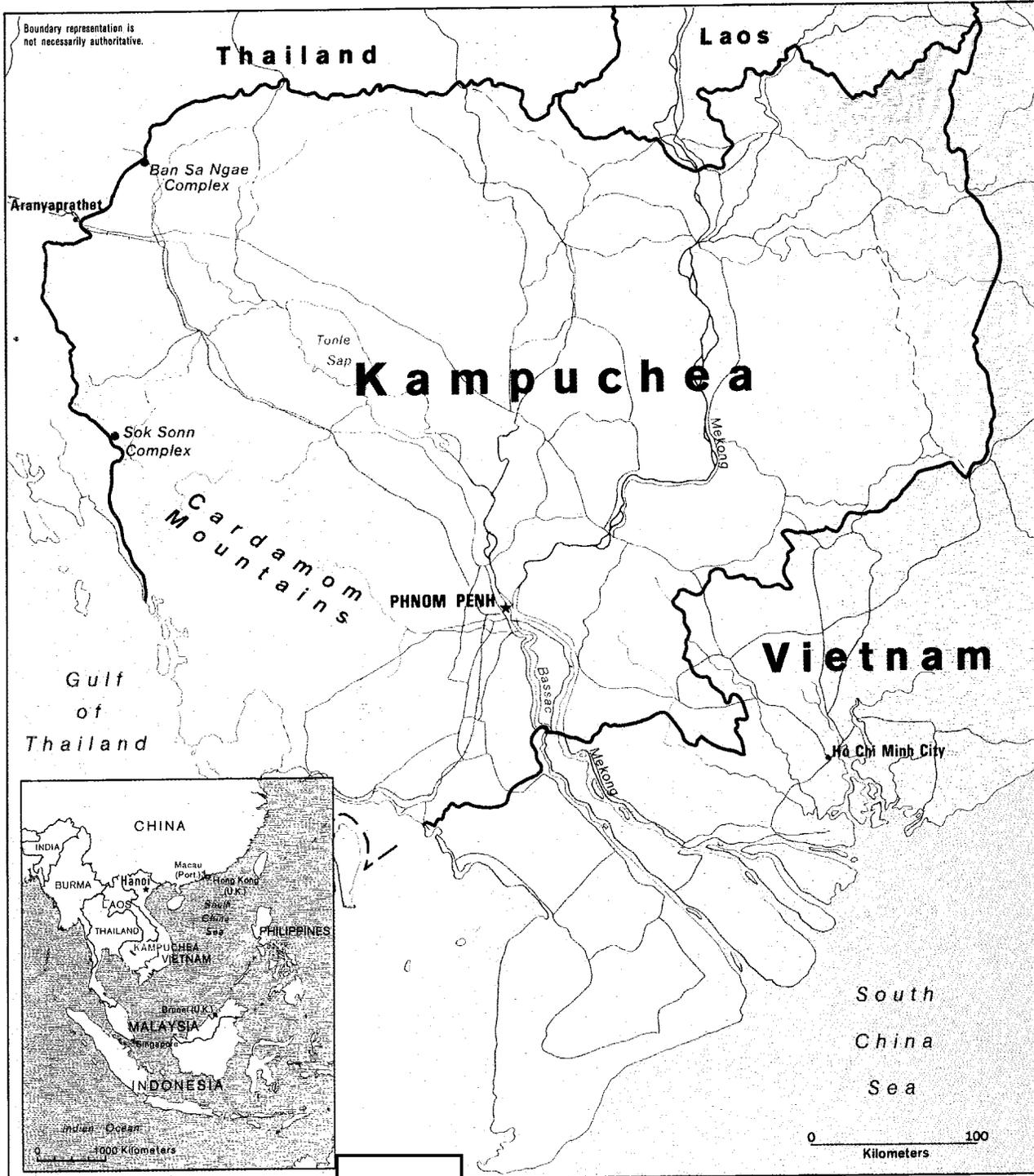
ASEAN members Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand are increasingly intent on building up the non-Communists, whether or not a coalition is formed:

- A prolonged conflict in Kampuchea without perceptible results, however, could strengthen views within ASEAN that armed resistance will not succeed and could result in ASEAN's acceptance of a *modus vivendi* largely on Vietnam's terms. This could lead to an empty-seat formula at the UN and wider recognition of the Hanoi-backed PRK regime.

¹ The Director, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, would add, “The possibility exists, however, that reduced Soviet assistance, economic deterioration, and political malaise in Vietnam might eventually convince the Vietnamese leaders that their policies should be modified, even though their fundamental goals remain unchanged.”

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DISCUSSION

Background

1. Vietnam's inability to destroy the Khmer resistance quickly has resulted in a long war of attrition that has enabled the resistance forces not only to survive but to grow in strength. The two principal resistance groups, the DK and the KPNLF, are stronger now than at any time in the past three years. The ASEAN states are backing efforts to induce these two groups, plus Prince Sihanouk, to form a loose coalition government in order to oppose more effectively the Vietnamese occupation of Kampuchea. Recognizing Vietnam's strong military advantages, the strategy of any Kampuchean coalition necessarily would be to make Vietnam so weary of the war and the costs so high that it will eventually seek a political compromise and withdraw its troops.

Vietnamese Forces in Kampuchea

2. A key aim of Hanoi in Kampuchea is to establish a subordinate buffer state that will help ensure the security of Vietnam's southern borders. The Vietnamese believe that a Kampuchea not under their control would be tempted to ally with China or other hostile powers. The Vietnamese are attempting to gain control of the population by building a reliable Khmer People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP) and establishing the necessary administrative structure for an effective government for the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Control of territory is important but of lesser priority. With an estimated 180,000 troops in Kampuchea, Vietnam controls major population centers and most principal lines of communication. Approximately 30 percent of total Vietnamese military strength in Kampuchea is responsible for assisting the Vietnamese civilian cadre in establishing a pro-Vietnamese PRK political-military infrastructure at the provincial, district, and village levels.

3. Having strengthened its northern border, Vietnam can now draw on its resources to reinforce its

position in Kampuchea if challenged by greater resistance activity—without significantly weakening its defenses against China. Reinforcement might also embolden the Vietnamese to move into Thailand to support rear attacks against guerrilla strongholds in Kampuchea. Tactical aircraft could also support ground operations. To date, air operations have been confined largely to logistic support, reconnaissance, and medical evacuation missions.

4. Although there is evidence that the Soviet Union wishes to pursue a bilateral relationship with Kampuchea, Soviet support for Vietnam's position in Kampuchea appears solid. The Soviet-Vietnamese relationship ensures Hanoi of continuing military and economic aid as well as diplomatic support for its Indochina policies. Although the bulk of Soviet military aid deliveries since 1979 has gone to forces in northern Vietnam, recent reports of a possible rise in the number of Soviet advisers and the planned re-equipping of Vietnamese forces in Kampuchea in 1982 suggest growing attention by Moscow to the Vietnamese effort in the Kampuchean theater of operations.

5. Despite these significant military advantages, Vietnamese combat performance has been mixed. Long duty in a foreign land, coupled with the constant threat of disease and debilitating combat against an elusive guerrilla foe, has taken its toll on Vietnamese forces. Friction between the large number of recruits from southern Vietnam and their officers, often from the north, exacerbates tensions in the ranks, and many soldiers reportedly have deserted and gone back to Vietnam or fled to Thailand; others are reluctant to patrol aggressively outside their bases of operation. The Vietnamese recognize their problems and since early 1981 have taken steps to improve military performance. They have begun to replace personnel losses, upgrade equipment, correct logistic problems, and improve their command and control structure. It is too early to assess the effectiveness of these moves.

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6. Crucial weaknesses in Vietnam's political control of Kampuchea will also be difficult to overcome. Because of the poor education and political apathy of the Khmer population, the Vietnamese have not been able to train adequate numbers of qualified party cadres in the Heng Samrin regime to implement party directives at the village level. As a result, the Vietnamese have not found a quick way to develop a reliable and effective KPRP. The Vietnamese themselves do not have a large enough corps of competent political workers yet deployed in Kampuchea. While Vietnam's patient, long-term efforts to build a PRK infrastructure appear to be making headway, a successful pacification of Kampuchea will take a long time. The fear that the DK might return to power works to the advantage of the Vietnamese, but, as the occupation drags on, Khmer animosity to the Vietnamese is likely to grow.

DK Forces: Effective and Disciplined

7. The DK regime remains the legitimate government of Kampuchea recognized by the UN. The DK constitutes the strongest and largest anti-Vietnamese, anti-PRK resistance group, but, like all the resistance groups, remains largely dependent on external supplies of food, weapons, and ammunition. It has a strong, proven military leadership, experienced in guerrilla operations. Over the past two years, the DK has reorganized and expanded, and its command and control are stronger now than in the months following the Vietnamese ouster of the Pol Pot regime from Phnom Penh in early 1979.

8. DK forces comprise at least 35,000 troops armed with light weapons and some crew-served mortars, recoilless rifles, and heavy machineguns. Most DK forces are located in western Kampuchea along the Thai border and in the Cardamom Mountain region. They have also established a growing presence in the north-central region. Other centrally controlled units are operating throughout the country. The DK operates mostly in 10- to 12-man teams but occasionally in units as large as 300 troops. Operations include frequent ambushes, interdiction of Vietnamese lines of communications, and occasional assaults against urban targets, including Phnom Penh.

9. The DK, while constituting the strongest resistance group, is no match for the larger Vietnamese forces. It lacks the manpower and firepower to engage the Vietnamese in sustained conventional battles. Nor does it have the capability to gain or hold large chunks of populated territory in Kampuchea or to expel the Vietnamese. While the DK is currently well armed for hit-and-run tactics, it remains dependent on the Chinese for weapons and other military supplies.

10. A principal weakness of the DK is its bad reputation. DK leaders are acutely aware of the problem, and they have taken steps to broaden their base of support. For example, in 1980 the DK announced that Khieu Samphan was the chief of state and that Pol Pot, the former chief of state, would retain only the command of the army. In the areas the DK controls, forced collectivization has been dropped. In its place, the DK has begun labor pooling, a step that makes available additional manpower resources. The DK has also allowed private plots and encouraged cottage industry on a semiprivate basis. In addition to increasing self-reliance and improving morale in base areas, these steps are clearly intended to reduce the intense hatred that many Khmer retain for the earlier Pol Pot regime. The recently announced dissolution of the DK's Communist Party is also an apparent attempt to improve its image and broaden domestic and international support.

11. The economic-related steps taken by the DK have had mixed results. Morale has improved noticeably among DK civilian supporters. Some refugees report that DK proselytizers working in villages under Vietnamese military control in western Kampuchea have had some success in convincing Khmer peasants that the DK has abandoned its former radical Communist economic policies. In other areas, however, refugees claim that DK guarantees of liberal economic policies are not believed by the peasants.

12. It is too early to judge whether the announced dissolution of the Communist Party and the adoption of nationalistic appeals will persuade large numbers of Khmer to support the resistance. Khmer-Vietnamese ethnic animosity may eventually lead Khmer people to join anti-Vietnamese resistance groups, but so far it

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has largely benefited the non-Communist Khmer factions rather than the DK. Many fear, however, that fighting the Vietnamese might bring back Pol Pot and the DK.

The Uneven Resources of the KPNLF

13. The KPNLF is the largest, most active, and most respected non-Communist resistance group operating in Kampuchea. Led by Son Sann, an experienced Khmer politician with extensive contacts among Khmer intellectuals, former bureaucrats, and the middle class, the KPNLF represents a potential alternative to the Hanoi-controlled Heng Samrin government and the DK, but it faces formidable obstacles. It lacks dynamic, competent leadership and it needs to broaden its appeal among the Khmer population. In addition, it needs to develop reliable sources of financial, material, and international support. The KPNLF's military prowess is unproven and it will have to approach parity with the DK's armed forces in order to avoid being overpowered by them. The KPNLF alone does not have the potential to develop into a force strong enough to challenge militarily the Vietnamese in Kampuchea.

14. The KPNLF probably has a maximum armed strength of 7,000 to 8,000. There is insufficient evidence to confirm KPNLF claims that an additional 3,000 troops could be put into the field if they had adequate weapons. The majority of the KPNLF's armed forces lack training, guerrilla warfare experience, and leadership. Most potential Khmer officer candidates with previous experience have been resettled to third countries, and they are reluctant to leave families, jobs, and security for an unknown future with a struggling resistance group.

15. The KPNLF's most effective troops—about 1,600—are all located in far southwestern Kampuchea in a complex centered on the small village of Sok Sonn. Knowledgeable observers have concluded that the complex has the most effective guerrilla war effort under way among the various non-Communist forces and is the nucleus of the KPNLF resistance. Located in a remote area of the Cardamom Mountains, the Sok Sonn complex is partly self-sufficient, is one of two KPNLF bases exclusively inside Kampuchea, and is the only main base camp not highly vulnerable to

attacks by Vietnamese forces. It remains to be seen whether the performance of this particular element could be projected to the rest of the movement.

16. Approximately 60 percent (4,000 to 5,000 troops) of the KPNLF's armed strength is deployed at its central zone headquarters in the border area around Ban Sa Ngae. Despite this concentration of troops, there is no effective guerrilla warfare under way, and training remains largely conventional. Troops at Ban Sa Ngae occasionally conduct shallow reconnaissance patrols farther into Kampuchea, but for the most part avoid contact with the Vietnamese. This is symptomatic of the low level of KPNLF leadership, motivation, and capability. The base, located in open terrain, is not defensible. Even a limited Vietnamese attack there would badly damage and discredit the KPNLF. The balance of the KPNLF's forces are concentrated in several small camps along the northern Kampuchea border. These forces are the least effective in the KPNLF structure.

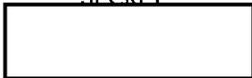
17. The KPNLF's meager budget has inhibited its growth. The KPNLF does not have a steady supply of ammunition and is not able to purchase sufficient stocks of medicine and materials. Total funds available to the KPNLF are estimated at less than 10 percent of those available to the DK.

18. Even with greater material support, the KPNLF would face a struggle to increase recruitment. The most available manpower pool is the Khmer village and refugee population (some 100,000 people)² near the Thai border south of Ban Sa Ngae. On the basis of this population, the KPNLF may be able to increase its forces to 15,000 or 20,000 men. This area is the location of some of the worst commands in the KPNLF structure, however, and many Khmer there refuse to join the resistance.

19. Son Sann and the KPNLF are well known in Phnom Penh, but the majority of Khmer peasants appear to know little about the KPNLF and are not

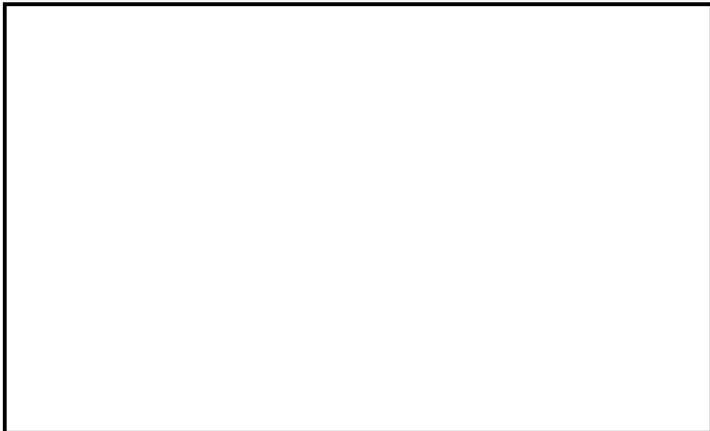
² The total number of Khmer refugees along the Thai border could increase dramatically if there is a sharp deterioration of living conditions in Kampuchea. According to recent intelligence estimates, Kampuchea could suffer a rice shortage in excess of 400,000 tons—or about 45 percent of the estimated annual rice requirement—during 1982.

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familiar with its leadership. In the tradition of pre-1975 Khmer bureaucratic elites, Son Sann has had little interest in, or contact with, the Khmer peasantry throughout his long public career. Phnom Penh authorities contribute to Son Sann's identity problems with propaganda that associates him and the KPNLF with the DK.



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20. In some areas away from the immediate western border regions, the KPNLF image suffers from a popular association with small bands of corrupt warlords, smugglers, and bandits who exploit the Khmer peasants. The peasants are also reluctant to give support to the KPNLF because they are well aware that it is unable to offer protection from Vietnamese and PRK authorities—or the DK.

The Impact of Sihanouk

21. Relative to the DK and the KPNLF, the resistance apparatus of Prince Sihanouk is poorly organized, is short of money, lacks coordinated policy, has no meaningful military strength, and has few international supporters. Support for the Prince exists in the countryside, but it is not organized. The Moulinaka—the military wing of Sihanouk's followers—consists essentially of three small units on the Thai border more than 200 kilometers apart. Total armed strength of these units, which are highly vulnerable to Vietnamese attack, is less than 1,000 troops. A lack of cooperation and coordination among the Moulinaka military leaders further dilutes the Prince's military assets.

22. Sihanouk, however, has far stronger popular appeal, mainly among the peasantry, than any of the other resistance leaders. Coupled with his international prestige and the stamp of legitimacy he can confer on a regime, the Prince is a potentially valuable asset to all parties in the Kampuchean equation. The Vietnamese recognize his appeal to the rural Khmer and, despite strong public statements to the contrary, there is some evidence that he might be acceptable to Hanoi in the event of a political settlement.

23. Despite his broad rural appeal, the Prince has no independent power base that he can use to shape developments concerning Kampuchea.



Coalition Prospects

24. During a late November 1981 meeting involving leaders of the three Kampuchean anti-Vietnamese resistance factions, the Singaporeans proposed a loose coalition governmental structure within which each faction would retain a distinct identity. As proposed, the coalition would work together toward Vietnamese withdrawal from Kampuchea and then dissolve to enable the Khmer people to choose a form of government through UN-conducted free elections. This type of loose structure favors the non-Communists, who doubt their ability to survive a close association with the DK. Son Sann quickly agreed in principle to the proposal, subject to the approval of his advisers; Sihanouk eventually supported the proposal. In late January the DK rejected the Singapore proposal but continued negotiations. DK leaders believed the proposal undercut the legitimacy of the existing DK government structure, left unanswered the role of the DK in any future government, and would have adversely affected the morale of the DK rank and file because of the subordinate role it assigned the DK faction.

25. The Singapore proposal, which essentially would have created only a united front, was useful in keeping negotiations going, in part because it sought to force the resistance groups to concentrate on the objective of driving the Vietnamese out of Kampuchea—the key goal of all three groups. It also sought to curtail sharply the arguing over structures, procedures, and posts in a coalition government that slowed progress in earlier coalition talks.

26. Son Sann's principal worries—that a merger with the DK will destroy the KPNLF's potential

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political appeal and that the DK would swallow its weaker partners—cause him to favor a coalition that allows each member to retain its own military organization and political identity. The DK almost certainly will offer counterproposals. The DK and the Chinese believe that a united front would add pressure on the Vietnamese. The Chinese are likely to advise the DK not to scuttle negotiations with the non-Communist resistance. Both the Chinese and the DK probably also believe that a united front would assist the DK in maintaining its UN seat. The timing of the DK's recent announcement that it was dissolving its 30-year-old Communist Party was probably a stratagem to make its expected counterproposals to form a coalition more palatable.

27. Negotiations are likely to be prolonged. Even if a coalition is eventually formed, it would be fragile because of constant internal strains, stemming in large measure from deep mutual distrust among the resistance leaders. Unchecked, these strains could cause the coalition to unravel quickly.

28. The DK leadership is not likely to agree to a significant sharing of power with, much less subordinating itself to, some other political entity—particularly given the preponderant military role its forces play on the ground in Kampuchea. Despite pledges of coalition cooperation, the DK can be expected to actively oppose any major expansion of the KPNLF's armed strength.

29. Personality differences and poor personal relationships would also plague a coalition's leadership, although working for a common goal of Vietnamese withdrawal might overcome these problems

30. Among the resistance forces, the establishment of a coalition would cut two ways. A backlash could be expected from some KPNLF troops who strongly detest the DK; loyalty within the DK is uneven and some troops might try to break away from DK commands to join KPNLF forces.

Impact of Foreign Interests on the Resistance

31. Regardless of the potential for an effective anti-Vietnamese front, levels of resistance in Kampuchea will be determined in important measure by key foreign interests in Kampuchea.

32. *China.* China's principal goal in Kampuchea is to counter the expansion of Vietnamese and Soviet influence there. Beijing probably perceives little alternative to a relationship with Hanoi marked by long-term hostility and has sought few alternatives to a policy aimed at keeping pressure on Vietnam from as many sides as possible. The Chinese believe such a strategy will eventually force Hanoi to retrench in Kampuchea, loosen its ties to the Soviets, and recognize Chinese security interests in the region.

33. *Vietnam.* Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea and installation of a puppet government served not only to eliminate the DK-Beijing threat to Vietnam's southern security but also to advance Vietnam toward its long-held ambition to dominate all of Indochina. Hanoi now is attempting to build a viable—if subservient—indigenous Khmer regime and army, while holding the resistance at bay. The Vietnamese have no interest in negotiations for a political settlement that does not acknowledge the PRK's existence and allow a continued Vietnamese presence. Given traditional Khmer hostility to the Vietnamese, the difficulties of building an indigenous regime, and a continuing active resistance, there is no prospect for a substantial Vietnamese withdrawal—the major stumblingblock to negotiations with ASEAN and a reduction of regional tensions. There is some evidence that the Vietnamese are seeking ASEAN reactions to a cosmetic alteration of the Phnom Penh government to include some non-Communists.

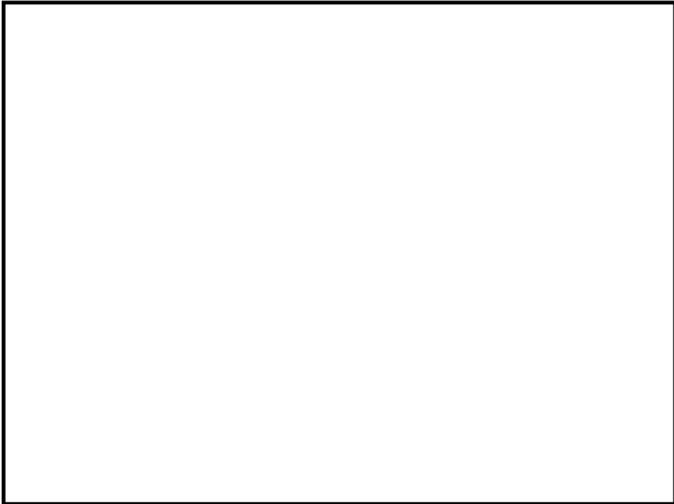
34. *Soviet Union.* In attempting to expand its influence in Southeast Asia, Moscow's principal con-

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cerns are to contain China and diminish US influence, for the present complementing Vietnam's national interests in the region. For their sizable economic investment in support of Vietnamese policy in Indochina, the Soviets have already realized substantial returns that further their regional interests. They have a highly visible advisory presence throughout Indochina, and have gained access to Vietnamese air and naval facilities that enhance their military capabilities in Southeast Asia. These facilities enable the Soviets better to support Indian Ocean deployments and to expand intelligence collection capabilities in the region.



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35. Support for Vietnam has put additional strain on Soviet relations with the ASEAN countries. Nonetheless, the strategic value of Vietnam in the Sino-Soviet rivalry clearly takes precedence over improving relations with other Southeast Asian nations, who have not been receptive to Moscow's overtures in any case. Moscow will seek greater influence in Southeast Asia over the longer term by using Vietnam and the neighboring Indochina states to strengthen its presence in the region.

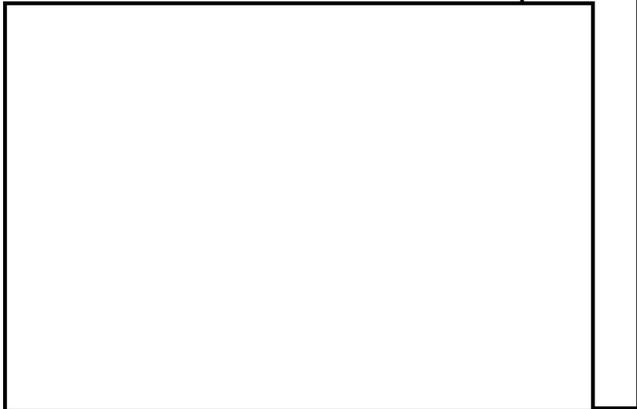
Conclusions

38. *Resistance Prospects.* The prospects for an effective coalition of the divided and antagonistic Khmer resistance groups are not good. For all practical purposes they will continue to operate as separate entities—even if some form of association among them is eventually established.

36. *ASEAN.* The ASEAN states are publicly united in seeking withdrawal of Vietnamese forces and neutralization of Kampuchea. They insist that they are looking for a political, not a military, solution to the Kampuchean problem.

39. If current coalition efforts should suffer an irreparable breakdown, some ASEAN states might pursue a non-Communist coalition strategy. Malaysia and Singapore have indicated that they might work toward strengthening the non-Communist resistance in hopes of eventually supplanting the DK, and offering the Khmer an alternative to two unpopular regimes. But this approach would alienate China and undermine the support for the DK's UN seat.

37. Despite a strong commitment to ASEAN unity, differing views of the regional threat have resulted in different strategies within ASEAN for dealing with the Kampuchean problem. The ASEAN states are unlikely to assist materially the DK forces, which will continue to be supplied exclusively by the Chinese.



40. The DK will remain the strongest and largest resistance group, but it will not be able to reduce its near-total dependence on external supplies of food, weapons, and ammunition. Its bad reputation, moreover, precludes a rapid expansion of its forces through recruitment thus limiting its military options.

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41. There is little likelihood that the non-Communist resistance will soon achieve military parity with the DK. Outside support for the non-Communist groups, particularly the KPRLF, is necessary to lessen problems of weak leadership, inadequate training, and shortages of arms, food, and medicines. Even with an expansion of outside support, it is an open question whether the KPRLF would be able to gain sufficient

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military credibility. However, to be considered part of an eventual political solution in Kampuchea, the KPNLF must expand its military operations.

42. The Khmer resistance, whether working as individual entities or in coalition, is not likely to dislodge the Vietnamese from Kampuchea. With increased external support, however, the resistance could escalate the guerrilla war, raise the cost of occupation, and indefinitely keep the Vietnamese from pacifying Kampuchea.

43. Despite the problems that the resistance is trying to exploit, the Vietnamese expect to wear it down in a long-term war of attrition. Hanoi is unlikely to make any concessions that would endanger its dominance of Kampuchea, which it considers fundamental to its national security. Vietnam will be able to meet the costs of occupation as long as Soviet aid bolsters it against the domestic and international pressures that might alter its behavior. The possibility exists, however, that reduced Soviet assistance, economic deterioration, and political malaise in Vietnam might eventually convince the Vietnamese leaders that their policies should be modified, even though their fundamental goals remain unchanged.

44. **Implications.** The formation of even a loose coalition would help shore up support for retention of the DK's seat at the UN and maintain Vietnam's relative international isolation. A coalition would en-

hance the prospects of greater international aid for the resistance, particularly the non-Communist resistance. A coalition would also strengthen the bargaining position of the resistance in the event of a political settlement

45. A Vietnamese perception that a much larger and more capable resistance force was being created, in a coalition or in a buildup of the KPNLF, would significantly increase the probability of a Vietnamese decision to attack all resistance concentrations along the border. In the event of such a far-reaching decision, the presence of Thai military units near the border might not be a constraint.

46. A higher level of conflict in Kampuchea would increase Vietnam's dependence on the USSR for the aid it needs to carry on the war as well as for protection against China. This, in turn, could lead to increasing Soviet and Chinese stakes in the outcome.

47. A prolonged conflict in Kampuchea without perceptible results might strengthen the Indonesian position that ASEAN must achieve an early *modus vivendi* with Vietnam. The international community's support for the ASEAN position at the UN would be likely to erode, perhaps leading to an empty-seat formula or, eventually, recognition of the PRK regime.

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